

*New-Mown
Hay*

New-Mown Hay

by

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Foreword



Most of these ramblings first appeared in the Clark County Chronicles, a convulsively-published newsletter circulated to a few old friends whom we have left behind. The newsletter was intended as a substitute for letters, and contained accounts of the less mundane details of our adventures in Clark County, Indiana.

It has taken me over a quarter of a century to learn that every job would be perfect if it weren't for just one or two other employees. As a result of my inability to grasp that simple truth early on, I have changed jobs a lot. Somehow, most of those jobs that were going to turn into a real career were in some other state. That accounts for our far-flung sprinkling of distant close friends, and the birth of the Chronicles.

Without delving too deeply into my employment history, let me say that my wife, Anna Marie, and I spent the first nine years of our marriage between our home state of Indiana and our favorite state of

Florida. We moved from Florida to northwestern Arkansas in the Spring of 1978, immediately purchasing an old house perched on the side of a hill in the Boston Mountains. We spent the next six years learning how to get by on more than some but less than most. In a failed attempt to get closer to our families in Indiana, we ended up in southwestern Ohio in June of 1984. We rented for a year, and then purchased a beautiful acre and a quarter with a run-down house. Our plan—to rehab the house while paying it off at a phenomenal rate, then sell it at a hefty profit (see *Phases*). Since 1991 we have been living in an old house on 4 acres in Clark County, Indiana (*Poplar House*).

Writing the newsletter each month or so led me to reflect on the places we had lived, and then upon the more fascinating (albeit, perhaps only to me) subject of our personal experiences in those distant lands. As a result, I began adding little nostalgic essays and reminiscences to the letters, which seemed to amuse the subscribers. The most readable of those tales are reproduced here, along with a few snatches of verse.

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Phases



his latest house purchase represents the beginning of the end of a three-phase plan conceived in Arkansas and continuously flexed and contoured over the years. The idealized aspects have fallen away as the harsher realities of life have impinged on our (but mostly my) daydreams, but one adjusts. Night dreams fade quickly, and their daytime counterparts are just as diaphanous.

When we bought the house in Winslow, Arkansas, we had only basic home maintenance tools and skills. I had dreams of subsistence living, of shedding the daily drudgery of working to please someone other than myself. We had no money to spare and so needed no incentive to do it ourselves. We learned a lot about the basics of repair, gardening, canning, and finding bargains, and I began to think about self-sufficient living. The house had been named by the previous owners, sisters who had retired from a life of missionary

work. Over the entrance they had nailed little metal letters: *FOLDED WINGS*. It was appropriate for their last years, but not for us. A house should have a name that is not representative only of the tenants: *Folded Wings* has had many in the last ninety years, and it may have many yet to come. Living and working there provided us with our first opportunity to spread *our* wings and experience the freedom of being able to modify a house to suit our needs. When we left we knew what to look for and what to avoid in our next home.

Amarie and I were disappointed that we were not able to get work in Indiana, but shortly after arriving in Ohio we roughly formulated the next two phases of our homestead plan. The Darrtown Road property, like the Winslow house, was just what we were looking for at the time. We wanted a secluded house to fix up for resale. The plan was to spend eight years rehabbing it while paying off the mortgage, acquiring tools to last us during the coming lean times, and honing our construction skills to a fine edge. We expected to move to Indiana at a greatly reduced salary but with enough cash to avoid a mortgage on our next house. The plan was to buy many acres in the remote countryside, where rural hospitals would be glad to hire me (I modified self-subsistence into self-reliance, and envisioned a part-time position to leave time for truck farming). More modifications

were in store, but we did get the tools, and we developed what I would immodestly call near professional-quality home repair skills. We ended up with more cash after the sale than we had originally hoped for, and sold out six months earlier than scheduled, but beyond that the plan began to lose shape again. I never nailed little metal letters over the door, but I silently named the house *OAK KNOLL*; it, too, has had many tenants in the last fifty years, and each family has had different dreams. I named it for the oaks—red, white, chestnut, and burr—that surrounded it on the little hill, and were there before the house.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

So now we begin the last phase, although, considering our history, I should probably just call it phase three. *Last* presumes too much. I'm not in a rural hospital nor have we purchased vast acres. The vast acres were available but the rural hospitals do not pay what I feel I am worth. Sometimes we both worry that we may be slipping into a semi-yuppie state. I, at least, could never be anyone's idea of a true yuppie, but I must admit that money and the comfort and security it provides has become more important to me over the years. My dream of part-time work has been merged with a plan for early semi-retirement. Truck farming has mutated into stained glass and wood working. Self-

reliance is still the rule, but I know that taxes and insurance premiums have killed self-subsistence forever. The Memphis, Indiana, property is still too new for a name. *Journey's End* has a nice ring to it and would look good on a rustic signpost, but, of course, it is about us and not the house. Since this house began as a log cabin it probably has more tales to tell than *Folded Wings* and *Oak Knoll* put together. Besides, this may not be the end.

Snakes in the Grass, and Elsewhere

*He saw the reptile lying...motionless in the sunlight,
"lit with colour like a rock with flowers."*

W.H. Hudson



It has been said that St. Patrick drove the snakes from Ireland. Were this true, which, of course, it is not, the seventeenth of March would be a sad day indeed and a cause for the wearin' o' the black. The unreasoning tradition of snake hatred goes back thousands of years, but its age does not make it a venerable belief. *...upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:* while it is true that snakes move upon their ventral surfaces, they certainly don't eat dust. They often climb trees and gaze out upon the forest from a comfortable branch, reflecting, no doubt, on how much more pleasant the world would be without lunatics with rakes and hoes.

The majority of my snake encounters occurred while we were living in Florida,

partly because they are more plentiful in the tropics, and partly because we spent much of that time in Myakka River State Park, where I was employed as a park ranger. Going about my appointed rounds in the garbage truck, I was always on the lookout for photogenic subjects for my slide shows, but I didn't want to risk losing my camera by leaving it on the seat of the truck. One day, as I was tooling toward Clay Gully at the northernmost end of the park, I spied a small diamond-backed rattlesnake sunning himself in the middle of the road. A lot of people, in profound acts of ignorance and primitive cruelty, intentionally run over snakes and other animals when they can, so I always try to stop and encourage beasts off the pavement when I spot them. In this case, however, I needed a good picture of a rattler for a planned talk on reptiles. I preferred to use photographs taken in natural settings, so even if I had brought along my camera, the macadam would not have been a suitable backdrop. Knowing that snakes get rather sluggish when relaxing in the sun, I leapt from the truck, rushed over to the creature, and snatched him from the road before he was aware of my intentions.

Now, an impulsive act is often regretted, but the importance of getting a good picture outweighed the inconveniences of the situation. The snake was only three or four feet long, and therefore easy

enough to hold just behind the head with one hand. I had nothing to put him in, so I needed to drive about five miles back to the house in a garbage truck with a floor shift and manual steering. It would have been a little easier if I had thought to grab the snake with my left hand but, as his venom was already starting to trickle down my wrist, I decided not to try to transfer him. Fortunately, the old honey wagon could be started in second gear, and the steering wheel was large enough that I could hold it with my knee while shifting to third with my left hand. In this rather unprofessional manner, I was able to get back to the house and get my find into a temporary herpetarium. Although Anna Marie was quick to grasp the situation and lend a hand when I pulled up unexpectedly in the middle of the day, I'm not sure she agreed that I'd taken the best course of action under the circumstances.

People used to bring animals that they had found or rescued to the park and they were usually sent to me for release, so that I could get a photograph first. In this way I was able to get great shots of young herons, alligators, a coral snake, and a four-foot water moccasin. I wanted to get a good picture of the latter with his mouth open in striking position, to show the white interior that gives him the name "cotton mouth." I always told my slide show audiences about the difficulty of obtaining it to reinforce my

contention that snakes are not particularly aggressive. The water moccasin is slow-moving on land, so I put him on the close-cropped lawn behind our house and took a few pictures. I waved my hand over his head to get him to open his mouth, but as soon as I pulled it away to take the picture, he closed it again; I guess he didn't feel threatened enough. Although I like snakes and am not unreasonably afraid of them, I didn't think it was a good idea to waggle my hand over the creature's head while looking through the limited field of the viewfinder. I tend to swell up under the influence of venom, and the hospital was twenty miles away. I finally got a good shot, and released the little animal in the swamps near our house. Had Amarie been home, she could have been the bait and the picture would have been much easier. She often worked behind the scenes to make my photographs successful.

When we left Florida, our snake encounters decreased but did not end. In Arkansas we had house-snakes, a not-unpleasant experience that had not occurred before or since. The ring-necked snake is about the size of an unsharpened pencil, black above and with a very fetching red ring around his neck. We had occasionally seen these small reptiles in Florida, but not often. The first one we sighted in Winslow was in our kitchen. Although they have no hands or feet,

snakes move very well on most surfaces. Linoleum, however, can be a problem. The ring-necked snakes had to resort to the side-winding method of locomotion, which is exhausting and difficult to control on slick surfaces. When we would come into the kitchen unannounced, startling one into flight, he would move so rapidly that it looked as though someone had skimmed him across the floor like a flat rock on a pond. It's even more difficult for a snake to stop on linoleum than it is for him to start. Eventually, word that the house was not empty must have gotten around, because our sightings became limited to the yard. I suppose they had come in through the crack under the door. They had to traverse carpet to get to the kitchen, but they always ended up there, so maybe the thrill of sliding across the slick surface at blinding speeds was attracting them.

We've been in the suburbs for eight years, now. We're more removed from wild things, except for the more domesticated and less threatening creatures, but snakes still visit now and then. Last summer I found about four feet of shed skin in the barn, and later that year the owner, a black rat snake, dropped onto my head when I pulled down an old cabinet that he was using for a home. He didn't seem particularly perturbed, but calmly slid into the woodpile in the back of the barn. I'm looking forward to renewing our nodding

acquaintance this spring: maybe he'll bring
a friend.

On Collectors and Collecting



I have had the collector's zeal (or curse) since childhood. I began with the usual accumulations of stamps, coins, and matchbooks, but soon found that truly complete collections required funds considerably beyond those at my disposal. One of the most frustrating aspects of collecting results from the collector's perverse need to have a complete collection of whatever useless group of items has caught his fancy. I say perverse, because the completion of a collection ends the hobby; the fun lies not in having but in finding. Even after forty-some years, I still am collecting, shifting desultorily from one group of items to the next: old radios, flashlights, carbide lamps, telephone insulators, and books, always books. Maintenance of my hordes is easy and clean, involving only the pleasurable pursuits of touring the countryside and

shopping the flea markets and antique stores, but it was not always so.

When I was 12 or 13, I became very interested in things biological. I have never been consumed by the passion of the researcher, but have always preferred field study: the eighteenth-century pastime of collecting and naming of natural things. I collected fossils and minerals, feathers and flowers, and spent hours in the basement pouring over Golden Guides and ancient textbooks from library sales in order to put a name to each of my finds. I have always respected animal life, and never condoned the conceit that allows some to kill needlessly, but I was able to accumulate a large number of recently deceased insects from window ledges and spider webs, and a surprising group of crayfish, snakes, and miscellaneous hairless creatures that had died suddenly and from unexplained causes. Those specimens in jars of alcohol shared the shelves in my basement study with dried fungi, bark, rocks, and all manner of *materia natura*. In a place of honor was my first skull, that of a cow, which I had fished from a creek somewhere in the Knobs.

Years later I was able to use much of the material I had collected when I began to give nature talks and slide shows during my stint as a park ranger in Florida. I had donated some study skins and my insect collection to Indiana University before we

moved, and one specimen I left in a Louisville museum, but most of the baggage was (and still is) packed in boxes and stored with other currently unused items. Another rule of collecting is that one never disposes of a collection (although one may pass it on to another collector, who will appreciate its true value). I used some specimens as hand-arounds, but mostly I took photographs of fossils and skulls for slide shows, to more clearly illustrate points about animals that were not apparent from photographs of living specimens. In particular, I was working on a program about mammals, and needed a fairly complete collection of skulls to compare brain size, jaws, teeth, etc. I already had used several skulls in other programs, including that of an alligator who had met an untimely demise in a disagreement with a larger member of the species, and a raccoon who had been destroyed due to rabies. Most of the other skulls came from road kills, sadly common wherever a highway passes through the countryside. Most animals who are killed by cars are thrown from the road, and a conscientious collector who is out early in the morning can pick up just about anything from a snake to a bear. Many of the animals are in good enough shape to preserve the skin, but they're bulky and difficult to store in Florida's climate, so I usually opted for the skull. In order to avoid unpleasant odors, I

always removed the head on the spot and put in a plastic bag with formaldehyde. I kept a neat little dissecting and collecting kit in the car at all times so as to be ready should a chance of a lifetime present itself[†].

I had acquired skulls from almost every representative family of mammals in the park; even a poor otter had succumbed to the highways, but I still needed a skunk. Skunks love worms, and consequently large numbers of these slow and inoffensive beasts are killed at night after a shower, when earthworms tend to crawl up onto the highway to get out of their flooded tunnels. In spite of this sad fact, I had not come across one in good enough shape to use until one morning as Amarie and I were driving along a desolate stretch of state highway. As was my habit, I pulled the car to the side of the road in line with the body in order to provide a screen from passers-by, and set to work with my collection kit. I had just severed the head when Marie quietly informed me that we had company. A large, bear-like Florida State trooper had pulled up behind our car

[†] I was always on the lookout for a bear or a cougar, but never had any luck. I was told that shortly before we arrived in Florida, an elephant from the circus had died and was taken to the landfill. Talk about missed opportunity! I always kept an eye open when I took a park garbage truck to the dump, just in case the skull might have resurfaced.

and was striding toward us with a comforting smile on his face. I was crouched down by the front tire with my back to him, and he assumed we had a flat: he was about to lend a hand like a good Samaritan. As I turned around and began to rise, his gaze dropped to my rubber-gloved hands and to the scalpel and skunk's head they were holding. I think he caught a good whiff of the scent at the same instant, because his face fell and he immediately reversed direction mid-stride. I, of course, began to explain that I was a ranger in nearby Myakka River State Park, and was collecting a skull for a slide show. As I talked, I advance toward him; as I advanced, he retreated backwards before me. By the time I had finished my explanation, he was slipping back into his patrol car and grabbing for the gear shift, his smile replaced by a glazed, furtive look. He assured us that everything was just fine, and that he didn't want to interrupt our work, as he pulled back onto the highway. I felt bad about disturbing him, but the skull completed the collection and made the slide show. I still have it, packed away with the coins and the radios, a memento of old times waiting to be passed on to another collector who can appreciate its value more than the trooper. I think we may have unintentionally deprived a lot of legitimately distressed motorists of that officer's assistance—at the least, he was probably a

lot more cautious about stopping to help
for a while afterwards.

Beneath the Hoosier Hills

O to be nestling 'neath some pathless cavern...

Euripedes



The subject of cave exploration has come up in conversation several times recently, and appropriately so.

Although it's a year-round pursuit, late autumn always puts me in the mood to go out into the woods to look for caves. At one time, I spent every Monday doing just that in Indiana's Harrison-Crawford State Forest, and I've been thinking about reviving the practice. As far as actual exploration is concerned, my age and diameter may exclude all but the easiest passages; caving can be a grueling pursuit, even for the young and fit. I've often sat exhausted at the bitter end of some long and tedious tunnel, thinking about the hours of crawling necessary to get back out and wondering why I had to go *all* the way in. On a few occasions, however, coming out was the worst part.

We used to take a lot of trips in the winter, when we were eager to get out but the weather was too foul to hike in the woods. Caves, of course, are the same comfortable temperature all year. I remember a trip to Endless Caverns that sharply illustrated an easily forgotten *caveat* of cold-weather spelunking: you eventually have to come back out. We had to park our truck and hike about a half-mile to the entrance. The cave does have an end, but it's about a mile long, and very wet. There are dry passages at the back, but you have to wade through a deep stream to get in or out. A one-mile cave takes about five hours round trip, so we were pretty well used up by the time we spotted the bluish light and felt the temperature change that always marks the entrance passage. We stumbled out, wet and chilled to the bone, into a veritable blizzard. I don't remember a lot about that double-time hike back to the truck where dry clothes awaited us, but I do remember how good tuna fish sandwiches tasted, and how we enjoyed the heater on the long drive home.

There are three caves in Henderson Park just outside of Salem, Indiana, but I've only been in two of them. Mill Cave is wet and fairly easy, but it does contain an interesting passage called the Gun Barrel. About a half-mile into the cave there is a tight cylindrical passage that connects with another quarter-mile of good cave. The

Gun Barrel is slightly larger in diameter than the human body, coated with mud, and has several bends in its twelve-foot length. Once in the tube, you have to move forward by undulation, and there is not even enough room to move your arms forward if you went in with them at your sides. The first person through has the most interesting trip; it's easy to imagine that the passage has no end, since the bends keep visibility to a minimum. I always think of Floyd Collins when I'm in a tight place like that. On the return trip, I can't help thinking that if I had a heart attack while in the Barrel, my only available rescuers would be trapped behind me, sort of like bees in a bottle and I would be the cork. Somewhere I have a picture of our friend Cheryl Justice emerging from the Gun Barrel, smiling and poised over the puddle of water she will have to drop face-first into in order to get out.

The other Henderson Park cave I've traversed is called Middle Cave, and has yielded some really memorable photographs. The major passages can only be reached by scaling a twenty-five-foot waterfall, a feat accomplished with an extension ladder. This is not as easy as it sounds, for several reasons. Firstly, like most caves, a long hike is required to reach the entrance. An aluminum ladder would be a lot easier to carry overland, but a wooden ladder is the best bet in the

entrance tunnel, since it is more easily floated around the bends. Those same bends limit the length of the ladder sections to ten feet, making the extended version a little shy of reaching the upper passage. Finally, the ladder can only be set up directly beneath the falls, so the intrepid explorers must ascend with hundreds of gallons of icy water pounding on their helmets. We had no electric lights on the first trip, so the first to ascend (guess who?) had to climb up the ladder *sans* head lamp while the other members of the party tried to shine their lights on the upper ladder rungs. The final six or seven feet of the climb involves a disregard for gravity and an incredible amount of faith in the literature concerning this cave. It is impossible to see into the upper regions while standing on the top rung—you just have to cling to the rounded and slippery lip of the falls and jump up, trying not to think about the drop behind. Once up, the carbide lamp can be rekindled and a safety line rigged for the rest of the group. The first one down on the trip back has some additional trauma, since you cannot see the ladder before descending: is it still stable, or is it even still there? After seven or eight hours unattended, who knows?

Cave stories are like some cave trips, they never seem to have an end. Amarie and I have been in dozens of caves in every state we've called home, and I could go on

for many more pages than this book can afford to provide. Considering the nature of our most memorable trips, maybe the rest of the tales should be saved for next Halloween.

Cold Friday Hollow

*It's a gray afternoon in September,
A presentment of the autumn to come.
I remember many a trip to Cold Friday Hollow
In this, the waning of the year.*

*The woods are thick, branches low and interwoven.
We scramble up the dry creekbed
And find ourselves stumbling over
A broken pavement of blue-gray limestone.*

*The stones are clothed in rags:
A mottled skin of lichens and moss,
Lumpy with wampum and the delicate fans
Of shells from a long-ago sea.*

*The hollow click and clack of rock against rock
Sounds like the echoing knock of footfalls
In a cavernous and empty hall.
No other sound so loud disturbs Cold Friday Hollow.*

*Smooth and muscular arms of blue beech
Reach out to us over the stream bed.
Greenbrier impatiently tugs at our sleeves,
And pantslegs become a montage of sticktights,
 beggars' lice, and burrs.*

*It's late and later, time to start back,
As soon as we see what's beyond the next bend:
Maybe some bright flower, the last of the summer,
Glowing with fall's colors—purple and gold.*

*Warm in bed, or gazing at a fire red,
Nodding, my fancy flies to a cold and forsaken hollow
Where once I wandered when the sun was bright,
Never imagining how it would be at night.*

*Crack of ice, rustle of leaves dead and sear,
There is no one but me for miles and miles.
Every imagined step takes me farther from home
Yet after every step I am compelled to take just one
more*

*Until, the pressure building, in terror and fear,
My spirit flies back to me, safe at home,
Leaving only an uneasy melancholy
And a longing for Cold Friday Hollow.*

Remembrance of Augusts Past...

...and suddenly the memory returns.

Marcel Proust



This is my favorite time of the year. There are things I like about all seasons, even the "bleak December," but the end of August and the first of September give me the best feelings. When I was a child, this was the end of summer vacation and freedom, and so was particularly precious. I was more aware of the clouds, the trees, the insects, and the very air itself, knowing that I would soon be shut away from them. It was as though I had been oblivious to the delights of the whole summer, and had to experience them all in just a few fleeting weeks. When I was in college and had learned to better deal with being shut away, this is the time of year when I made my plant collections in that first real botany class. Seeing the ripening grasses and late summer flowers brings back memories of field trips, herbariums, and truly enjoyable lectures

from a favorite teacher. It was also a time when I had fantasies of being paid to walk in the woods and collect plants.

A few days ago I stepped out on the front porch and was caught by a scent or a feel that let me know it was that time of year again. Like Proust I had forgotten the feeling, and will forget it again during the long winter months ahead. It takes only a smell, a taste, or a sound to bring it all back, as though the season had never changed. Sometime earlier the cicadas had started to sing. I can never tell when they start, one day I just realize that they're buzzing away high in the trees. Although everything is still green, the *shade* of green has changed. The sycamores are a little bronze, the maples a little maroon. Many of the grasses have gone to seed, adding patches of brown to the overgrown areas. Here and there a bright red sumac, creeper, or poison-ivy leaf has gotten a head start on its companions. Getting up as early as I now do, I've been able to track the shortening of the days a lot closer than usual. Now is time to start getting ready for winter. These days, very little preparation is really necessary; you check the furnace and maybe change the oil in the car, and that's that. If it gets cold, just turn up the thermostat. In spite of that, there is a comfort to the piling up of firewood, the canning of vegetables, the little last-minute repairs to the buildings. I can imagine the

safe feeling these tasks must have given earlier occupants of *Poplar House*, when it was truly just a poplar log house.

Every day I feel more at home here, especially when smells and seasons bring back buried memories. This first taste of September tells me that fall and winter are going to be unusually enjoyable. I guess I've been waiting for this time of year without even knowing it.

Trick or Treat



tonight, to borrow from Lytton, is dark and stormy. As we drift into October, the tang of Autumn brings with it memories of Hallowe'ens past. My sister and I began planning for each year's outing early, going over costume plans with our seamstress-on-retainer, our mother. My favorite disguise was a red devil suit. I remember my mother tediously stuffing the pointed tail, the tip of which she coated with phosphorescent paint. She made Mary an angel that year, with a glow-in-the-dark halo. We had a box of wigs, masks, and other theatrical trappings that we used to supplement Mom's creations. I can still recall clearly the scent of the starched masks and the feel of the paper-thin cloth of the dime-store costumes. There is something magical about things you possess, but which are kept out of sight except for one special time each year: Christmas decorations, Easter baskets, and Hallowe'en costumes.

I suppose it was trying to recapture some of that lost magic that sent a few

companions and me out on a final trick-or-treat adventure. We must have been about sixteen, and hadn't dressed for the occasion for what seemed like ages. The four of us were great monster fans, back in those days of more-civilized horror pictures. *Shock Theater* was on every Saturday night, and specialized in the great genera films of the thirties and forties. Like most serendipitous plans, from the sublime to the hare-brained, no one could remember later who had the idea first. We had been planning to make our own horror film with my movie camera, and had been experimenting with makeup and sets. We were ready for a dry run.

The details of the makeup and costumes have soften with time, and probably seem more clever in memory that they were in fact. Don had managed to find a cape somewhere and became Dracula. Steve had put together a Frankenstein-like monster, with scars and deformities. Elmer put on raggedy old clothes and developed a hump. I imposed once again on my mother and converted some old sheets into mummy wrappings; the application of my costume took some time. I don't believe I was able to wear more than a tee-shirt and jockey shorts underneath. I can't remember what I did about my feet. In any event, together we formed a quartet that most people would have crossed the street to avoid in daylight, let alone at night. In

other words, we had achieved the effect we had sought.

I remember the exhilaration of being out in the night air, unrecognizable and therefore liberated. We reveled in the attention given us by younger foragers (this was a long time ago—a lot of kids went out on Hallowe'en without a parent lurking a few yards behind them). Not surprisingly, many of them did cross the street to avoid us.

We had wandered around my neighborhood[†] for about forty-five minutes before the thrill began to ebb. I was getting cold, and we were all getting a little bored. That was probably why we decided to stop at a house or two for a little refreshment. After all, we were dressed for the occasion. The first host was a little taken aback by our company, but good-naturedly dropped a few treats into our outstretched hands (we had not brought bags, not intending to do more than stroll the neighborhood terrorizing all and sundry). The second house was not so friendly. The lady thought we were a little old for the game and her attitude was not softened one whit

[†] Due to the complexity of my costume and the resultant mechanical problems, I could not sit in a car or anywhere else. Therefore, everyone met at my house.

by the incredible cunning of our disguises. We took the hint and moved on.

About four blocks from my house and near the school, we had just decided to head back home. As we turned into the alley, Steve whispered, "Look!" under his breath and pointed at a black-and-white slowly moving down the street toward us. We assumed that the lady at the last house had called the police to report suspicious characters in the area, but I imagine they were just cruising around looking for pranksters. We stepped into the shadows and waited, knots forming in our guts. As the car passed the alley, it slowed and a spotlight flashed into our eyes. That was all we needed! Everyone took off in a different direction, without spoken communication; much like ants or bees, we instinctively knew the plan for survival. My direction took me over the fence and through the backyard of a school chum, although it's doubtful that he or his parents would have recognized me that night: a heavily-bandaged figure running stiff-legged through the grass, frightened eyes starting out of a gray and green face, ragged strips of mummy-wrappings trailing in its wake. I wonder what they thought of the bandages I heard rip as they caught on the wire fence.

We regrouped later at my house, once again thrilled and exhilarated. Everyone had escaped! Breathlessly we spit out the fragments of our stories in front of my

parents, I-told-you-so looks flickering across their faces. The terror forgotten, the adventure became a tale to be told and retold to each other: another bond between companions and another source of amusement during those endless nights of conversation and laughter that came to an end all too soon.

A Winslow Ghost

Spirit of the Boston Mountains



round 1903, the town of Winslow, Arkansas, was a popular vacation resort. Wealthy people came by rail from various parts of the country to spend the summer in some of the luxurious (for the area) hotels and to enjoy the clean air of the Boston Mountains. Near the Yellowstone Hotel, a large, two-level house was built on the side of a peak. From the covered porch, the owners could look out over the Ozarks and see Oklahoma some thirty or forty miles away. The house had many occupants over the years, as the town of Winslow sank into ruin. The hotels burned in spectacular winter disasters, the tourists found other resorts, and the Santa Fe ceased to stop, but the house remained. We became its owners (or stewards) in 1978.

The previous owners had been two elderly sisters who had served as missionaries in the East. Katherine and Florence planned to retire from their travels

and spend their declining years enjoying the tranquillity of the Ozarks. We learned a little about them from a neighbor. Katherine was strong-willed and controlled the household, the meek Florence deferring to her sister's judgment. Florence's decline was somewhat more rapid than Katherine's, and she died a few years after they had moved. Her sister eventually moved into a retirement home in Colorado, and sold the house to us through a Realtor. It stood empty for nearly a year, with no one to enjoy the view or listen to it creak in the wind.

We first saw the house in the early Spring. Every room, and there were many, had a door and most of the doors had locks. After roaming through the entrance level, we descended to the basement apartments. Some were partly finished and had apparently been used as living quarters. Part of the basement had a dirt floor and shelves of exposed bedrock, and dwindled to a crawl space under the front porch. In that area we came across a number of odd souvenirs, including a fragment of bone as big as my head (presumably from an elephant) and the sword from a swordfish; we assumed they were collected by the sisters during their travels. For one room the Realtor did not have a key. The walls were screened and covered with plastic, but we could get a hazy impression of the contents: an ancient wooden ironing board, set up but without a cover, and in the center of the floor a huge

wooden box, about the size of a rather deep coffin. When we took possession of the house, one of the first things I did was open the "coffin room" to see what was in the box. Disappointingly, it was empty. As we learned more about the sisters, we joked that it was Florence's coffin, and the room was where Katherine made her do the ironing, Cinderella-fashion. The old ironing board eventually went into the fireplace one cold winter night. The coffin I moved, with great difficulty, to the porch to serve as a firewood box; we speculated that that may have been its original function.

That same spring I put in a small vegetable garden, breaking the sod and tilling the soil with a spade. As I was planting seeds, I came across what I thought was a stone. Brushing the dirt away I was shocked to see a row of pearly-white teeth and a flash of pink, as though an open mouth was waiting just beneath the soil. Quickly recovering my dignity and sense of reason, I dug out a very old but perfectly preserved set of uppers. Judging by the small size, they had probably been a woman's, but who would throw them away? If the person had died, they probably would have been buried with her. Perhaps they had just been lost. Again, we connected them with Florence: in a fit of pique and to punish her sister for some imagined oversight (maybe she had scorched a blouse), Katherine pitched them

out the window, thus relegating the hapless Flo to a diet of mush.

The noises began, I think, in the fall. It always happened late at night. Right beneath our bedroom and from just outside the coffin room there would be a tremendously loud hammering sound. We could not only hear it, we could feel the vibrations as though someone were pounding on the floor joists with a sledge. Sometimes there would be a single thump, other times a rapid series of knocks. Of course, I went downstairs at first; of course, I never found anything. The usual explanations were offered, but rodents don't carry hammers, there were no water pipes in that part of the basement, and if settling timbers made noises like that, the house would have been caving in. Of course, it was Florence. Anna Marie said that she was upset because I had moved her coffin up onto the porch—it was getting cold at night. She also may have known that I found her teeth and had them in an old shaving mug along with other trinkets gleaned from the soil. In any event, I stopped searching for the source of the noise after a few fruitless midnight expeditions, and the noises stopped for no apparent reason after a few years.

All told, it was a peaceful house. I don't recall ever feeling threatened or uneasy there. If the noises were the manifestations of a poltergeist, and I honestly can't offer any other unimpeachable explanation, I don't think the intent was evil. The box certainly

wasn't a coffin and the teeth were too old to have belonged to Florence, but there must have been other sadness and heartbreak under that roof over the decades. We may have witnessed a feeble effort by some lonely spirit to touch again the life it had lost forever. Who can say for sure?

Winter

*Leaves race across the lawn in a sheet,
Tying to follow the wind as it hisses past;
Layers of iron-grey clouds settle against a white,
winter sky.*

*Bone-white sycamore arms stretching above
The grey-brown mist of the woods:
It's the cold, dark heart of Winter,
And all the world is sear and dead.*

A Winter's Tale



he cold weather we're now having reminds me of some particularly unpleasant experiences of winters past. Even though I'm warm and dry now, I can close my eyes and clearly remember exactly what it felt like to take a January swim in the cistern of our Ozark Mountain home a decade or so ago.

Our water was supplied by a well one hundred feet deep, but we were near the top of the Boston Mountains and that wasn't nearly deep enough. We could only run the pump about fifteen minutes every six hours before the well would run dry, so we used a concrete cistern as a reservoir. The house's supply pump drew from the cistern and we usually had enough water for the two of us, as long as a toilet didn't stick. Rain water supplemented the well water, so the tank stayed full most of the time. The supply pump's inlet was below the outlet, and the pump was not self-priming, so a foot-valve was attached to the pipe that drew water from the bottom of the tank. The foot-valve closed automatically when the pump

stopped running, so that water would remain in the pipe and the prime would not be lost.

We lost water pressure on a particularly cold day near the beginning of the year. There were several inches of snow on the frozen ground and the sky was the color of cast iron. After a little pointless troubleshooting I confirmed what I already suspected: the pump had lost its prime. The only way to restore the prime was to let water run backwards through the system from the pressure tank, through the pump, and down the empty pipe into the cistern. Of course, the foot valve was there to prevent this from happening, and it was at the bottom of six feet of icy-cold water. Now, I have to admit that this was not the first time this scenario had presented itself. It would have been easy to prevent had we not been pinching pennies so hard. I knew the foot valve needed to be replaced; it was sticking occasionally so that the pump sometimes lost its prime when it shut down, but a new one cost sixteen dollars and that was more than we could spare. That summer I had attached a faucet to the draw pipe just above the foot valve. When the pump lost its prime, I simply had to dive to the bottom of the cistern and open the tap for a few minutes. Water would flow backwards from the pressure tank and reprime the system, and I would have a pleasant dip. I already had the faucet, so the fix was free. I had thought

about rigging up some kind of long handle so the operation could be carried out topside, but had never figured out a way to do it without making a monetary investment. January was still a long way off.

I suited up with long underwear and cloth gloves, and went out to my doom with a scuba mask. I tied a rope around my chest and gave the end to Anna Marie. She told me later that she couldn't understand why I thought the rope was necessary, since the tank was not so big that I could get lost in it. I had been submerged in enough cold cave water to know that I might experience a little difficulty breathing, and wanted to make sure that she would be able to help me if I had trouble pulling myself out of the tank. As it turned out the cistern water was a lot colder than cave water. I decided to drop in quickly and get it over with. As the water traveled up my body, I could feel every molecule of air leaving my lungs. After a few seconds, that was all I could feel. Holding on to the rim of the hatch, I was able to pull in a few tiny breaths, but had lost the power of speech. I figured it wasn't going to get any better, so I dove to the bottom and opened the faucet. It took one more dive to close it again and with my last bit of strength I pulled myself back out.

Soaked to the skin and sitting in the snow and ice on a concrete slab in a brisk January breeze may sound like a cold situation, but after my swim in the tank I

actually felt warmer for a minute or so. The best part about restoring the water pressure was being able to stand in a hot shower afterwards. Fortunately, the pump didn't lose its prime anymore that winter, and in the spring we splurged and bought a shiny new foot valve. Experiences like that can change your priorities.

The Furnace's Curse



A couple of weeks ago I woke up cold. I get cold easily, and a drop of a couple of degrees is enough to wake me from a sound sleep. The furnace had gone off, and it was down to about fifty-six degrees (we set the thermostat back to sixty at night). A quick check showed me that the burner wasn't getting oil, so I started a fire in the wood stove and began to trace out the problem. I knew it was pretty cold outside, but I didn't realize that it had dropped to zero. By the time I had checked out the fuel supply and ascertained that the problem was in the burner assembly, it was time for Anna Marie to go to work. The real miracle here is that I was off that day. Furnaces, like cars, seem to cease functioning only in the morning on work days. I spent the next hour or so putting heat tape and insulation on the oil line outside, a job I had meant to do when I had moved the tank last August. That didn't do the trick, so I continued troubleshooting the problem indoors. Sitting on the bathroom floor in

front of the furnace, with the odor of number two oil making me a little dizzy, I thought about how much more unpleasant my previous experiences with a cantankerous oil furnace had been.

When we bought the house in Ohio, we knew that the furnace was near the end of its life. It should have been one of the first things we replaced, but we put it off. There were a few problems that first year, but we managed to muddle through. The second winter things began to go wrong on a more regular basis, but we decided to nurse it through another season or two. I replaced a few parts, and began to look more closely at the installation. We had been getting a lot of soot through the registers, and I traced that to the draft (or rather, the lack of draft). The furnace had replaced an earlier one, but it had been placed farther from the chimney. As a result, the smoke pipe was ten feet long: right at the legal limit. It also sloped down, but there wasn't much I could do about these problems without building a new chimney. The chimney had a cleanout door on the outside, but I couldn't see the pipe connection through the opening. I assumed that the stack came in above the door opening. Crawling under the house to the end of the smoke pipe, I could see that the thimble connecting it to the chimney was all but rusted away. When I pulled it loose, the reason for the poor draft was obvious: the chimney was filled with dirt

and debris, and the opening had been reduced to a hole the size of a screwdriver handle. The cleanout door was actually above the stack connector. Plants were growing in the dirt, encouraged, no doubt, by the warm air. As soon as I scooped out some of the fill, the returning draft sucked the dust up the chimney like a vacuum cleaner. One problem solved.

The furnace's intermittent failure to ignite properly was a more frustrating, and yet, more exciting problem. When the ignition would fail, a sensor would turn off the oil pump before too much fuel oil was delivered to the combustion chamber. When the temperature in the house started to drop, and turning up the thermostat didn't result in the hoped-for hum of the furnace, I would suit up and trudge out back to the cellar. After a few false starts, I could usually get it going again, but by that time there would be a considerable amount of oil in the fire box, and a lot of oil vapor in the chimney. Ignition would be followed by the freight-train roar of a really exciting, albeit short-lived, chimney fire. Little puffs of black smoke would come out of the registers, and a rather larger puff would rise from the chimney cap. The rumble shook the house, and was always a memorable event for visitors unacquainted with dying oil furnaces.

The worst case of ignition failure occurred on Christmas weekend while we

were visiting our families in Indiana. I had replaced most of the ignition circuitry, so we hadn't been having problems for some time. We had turned the thermostat down to fifty while we were gone, and that's what started the disaster. It got really cold that weekend, and the oil gelled in the lines, probably because the furnace was not cycling very frequently at such a low setting (we had insulated the house very well). Since it was Christmas, we left for the three-hour trip home fairly late in the day. The heater in our car wasn't working at expressway speeds (that's another sad story, reserved for later), and after a couple of hours our feet were like ice cubes. We had stopped an hour out of Louisville to warm up, but as soon as we got back on I-71 the heater would only blow cold air. A final stop for hot chocolate, and we figured we could survive the last hour of our trip. It would be after eight before we would get home, but we decided to postpone supper rather than extend our time in that cold car. About eight-thirty, we unlocked the door and stepped into a forty-five-degree kitchen. My feet were getting numb, anyway, so I guess I wasn't as uncomfortable as if I had been in bed when it went out. I stomped through the snow and began to thaw things out while Anna Marie lit a fire in the wood stove. Heat tape on the oil line and radiant heaters directed toward the pump did the trick in about forty-five

minutes, and it didn't take too long for the water pipes to thaw out after the furnace started. The wood stove had brought the temperature up to sixty-five or so by the time the furnace roared (literally) to life. I guess I should have been glad that no pipes burst that time—plumbing repairs would have kept me up past midnight. We had supper about ten o'clock, and enjoyed it a lot more than usual. I replaced the furnace the following fall, and we had no more heating problems.

Back at Poplar House, the problem was a lot easier to solve. I had understood from our seller that the furnace had been serviced for the season, but it turned out that it had not. The filter and nozzle were both severely clogged. A short time and nine dollars later we were back in business. Even though I have the luxury of working on this furnace from inside the house, I think it would be a good idea to clip a copy of this story to the August calendar page, just as a reminder to check things out. I have a habit of putting the wrong things off.

Branches Against the Sky



he holidays aside, many Hoosiers are glad to get December behind them. It's not that the weather really improves much in January, but its *character* changes: some feel for the better. Days in December are historically cold and gray, and the atmosphere is somber. Sometime around New Year's Day, the sun comes out and the sky turns a frigid shade of blue. Even when the roads are lined with ridges of dirty gray slush and the temperature is well below freezing, people seem to feel better if the sun is shining.

When the subject comes up, and I mention my preference for "a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year," acquaintances tend to imply that I should discuss my predilections with a paid professional. It's not that I shun blue and sunny days, but rather that I have learned to see beauty in the lacy patterns of branches against an iron-gray sky. I like the company of friends, but I also savor the

lonely feeling of hearing the wind rattling grasses and seed pods in an isolated winter meadow.

This is the mood I've been in driving home from work the past few weeks. Passing dry patches of woods and swampy lowlands, I have the opportunity to study the different shapes of trees and shrubs. Although I love all types of plants, trees are my favorites. There is nothing as encouraging as the first green of spring leaves; even though grass is growing and crocuses are blooming, no one really believes Spring has arrived until those first tiny, pale green leaves suddenly appear on the willows. A trip to West Texas or Oklahoma in the summer will make even a city-dweller long for the cool shade of oaks and hickories, and I don't know anyone who doesn't look forward to the beauty of maples and tulip poplars in the autumn.

Most of our trees go dormant in the winter and lose their leaves, but not the attraction they hold for me. Two species in particular stand out in the dark winter groves, the sycamore and the beech. I love to see the bone-white upper branches of the sycamores in the low-lying woods as I drive home along I-65. When I turn into our drive, the piebald trunks of several old sycamores brighten up the brown view with patches of green, gray, tan, and white.

This part of Clark County is too low for my favorite tree and, sadly, there are no beeches growing on our land. When we travel to the higher lands in Floyd and Harrison Counties I always keep an eye to the woods, looking for the silvery trunks of beeches. It's a constant source of irritation to me that vandals often try to prolong their mortality by carving their names in the smooth gray bark. It's hard to find a beech tree without scars as high as the arm can reach, but, since their lowest branches are usually out of reach, the bulk of the tree can rise another hundred feet in unmutilated, silver glory.

I won't live to see them reach those majestic heights, but next spring I'm going to plant beech trees on the higher part of our land. Those trees, at least, will be able to grow in peace, and perhaps charm some traveler with their branches against a white winter sky.

Fragment

Winter's morn, silver-grey and pearly white.

*Gazing out the window, I rest my head against the
chill glass.*

*I taste the moisture condensing on the cold pane:
Wintery dew.*

The scene before me offers a dull beauty:

*Dreary and prosaic, like the tired, buzzing white
light*

In some empty diner late at night.

The cold outlines of every counter and chair

(The labor of some forgotten architect)

Limned and remade into a drawing again:

A tedious study in black and white.

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